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ABSTRACT

In its report "Becoming a Nation of Readers," the Commission on Reading defines reading as the process of constructing meaning from written texts, a view of reading that makes the use of strategies seem probable. If a book is a source of partial information, and readers are supposed to use knowledge they already possess to determine the meaning of what they are reading, then good readers must do "something" to put it all together. The Commission believes the past decade's research indicates that reading is a constructive process, it is fluent and strategic, it requires motivation, and it is a continuously developing skill. Some direct instruction activities such as modeling a strategy by thinking aloud, or maintaining a dialogue between teacher and students are now being studied by researchers, with noticeable improvements in students' use of reading strategies for reading, studying, writing, and learning. Teachers should think of such skills and strategies as the "mental process" that good readers use when they encounter problems in reading, and therefore think of teaching as the explanations they can provide about a given skill or strategy, its value, and "the secret" of using it successfully. (NKA)

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Reading Education Report No. 69

READING STRATEGIES AND READING GENERALIZATIONS

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Abstract

This paper discusses what researchers say about reading strategies, and looks at those strategies which are used by good readers. It defines reading as a constructive and strategic activity, and suggests the characteristics of a good reader. The paper continues with descriptions of several techniques which are effective in improving reading comprehension, and which can be used by teachers who want to help students to become good readers.

Reading Strategies and Reading Generalizations

Oddly enough, the strategies good readers use as they read are not of much interest to most good readers. Most good readers simply just "do it," and devote little, if any, introspective thought to the process they engage in as they read an article, a poem, or a book.

Several groups of good readers, however, have a professional interest in the strategies good readers use as they read. Among these are teachers of reading, researchers who do basic and applied research about reading, and the developers of reading programs. Teachers want to be able to successfully teach all of their students to read with understanding; basic researchers want to understand more about the mental processes involved with reading; applied researchers want to know how to translate what is known about reading strategies into effective teaching strategies; and developers of reading programs make efforts to incorporate the latest and best strategies into their products.

What do people who do research about reading have to say about reading strategies? And for that matter, what is meant by a reading strategy? The second question is easier to answer than the first. The International Reading Association's definition of strategy is fairly straightforward:

> strategy (strat' i je) n. a systematic plan for achieving a specific goal or result. (Harris & Hodges, 1981)

To discuss what reading researchers have to say about reading strategies first requires some discussion about the state

of research about reading. During the past decade, research about reading has been accumulating with both escalating mass and increasing intensity. This expanding body of knowledge has the potential for being of great value to teachers, instructional program developers, and of course, other researchers of reading. It even has the potential for being of interest to people not professionally involved with reading. The condition of reading, the teaching of reading, and even research about reading are topics that frequently surface at cocktail parties, talk shows, and meetings of politicians.

Some of the reasons for the new visibility of reading research have to do with the presence of some "new kids" on the block--the arena of reading research contains a lot of new participants, including cognitive psychologists, linguists, ethnographers, and computer scientists. Researchers from these disciplines have become interested in many aspects of reading--from reading processes and strategies, to instruction which facilitates reading, to environments conducive to reading, and lots more. Their work joins that of reading educators who have been studying reading and reading instruction for a number of years. The result is the shedding of a significant amount of additional light (and as usual in reading, also a little heat), on a myriad of topics associated with reading. Much of this light is evident in the 1983 report of the Commission on Reading, "Becoming a Nation of Readers" (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1983). The definition of reading proposed in the chapter, "What is Reading?" reflects some of that light:

> Reading is the process of constructing meaning from written texts. It is a complex skill requiring the coordination of a number of interrelated sources of information. (Raphael, 1982)

At first glance, this definition seems short and relatively simple. A second glance at these two sentences confirms that the definition is short but perhaps not quite simple. The thought that accompanies a second glance gives rise to the realization that--for teachers of reading and developers of reading programs--the implications of this definition are anything but simple. A number of questions come to mind. For example, just what is it that readers do as they "construct meaning from written texts?" And what are the "interrelated sources of information that must be coordinated?" What are teachers and program developers supposed to do to get meaning constructed and sources of information coordinated?

In addressing such questions, the Commission first describes a view of reading comprehension that flows directly from its definition of reading. Reading is portrayed as a constructive and coordinating activity. This view of reading is contrasted with another view of reading: reading as a process in which the ability to pronounce written words gives the reader access to their meanings. The meanings of sentences and paragraphs result from combining the meanings of the words within them. Although the Commission acknowledges the importance of knowing how to pronounce and derive information from the words on a page, they point out that the understanding of sentences and paragraphs

involves a great deal more than the combining together of the meanings of the words in a sentence.

Some of these additional aspects of reading have to do with the person doing the reading. "Reading involves selecting and using knowledge about people, places, and things, and knowledge about texts and their organization" (p. 8). The Commission describes the role of what is being read somewhat metaphorically, "A text is not so much a vessel containing meaning as it is a source of partial information that enables the reader to use already-possessed knowledge to determine the intended meaning" (p. 8).

This view of reading probably contributes to making the task of teachers and program developers seem even more complex, but it makes the presence of something that might be described as a strategy seem more probable. If a book is a source of partial information, and readers are supposed to use knowledge they already possess to determine the meaning of what they are reading, then good readers must do something to put it all together.

And, what's more, when readers are coping with the partial information in the book, their own already possessed knowledge, and then determining meaning, they must be involved in an activity that "requires constructing meaning and coordinating a number of interrelated sources of information." By implication then, this complicated sounding activity is what good readers must engage in as they read, and such a complicated sounding activity might even be described as a strategy.

Yet, most good readers would not only claim ignorance when asked about the reading strategies they use, they would also claim innocence when asked how they learned their successful strategies. So then, what does this view of reading imply for teachers of reading and developers of reading programs? Do we have any evidence that reading strategies can be taught? Maybe the only way to acquire good reading strategies is to learn them through trial and error. Maybe some people have them and some people don't.

These depressing thoughts are dealt with directly--and positively--by five generalizations (pp. 9-16) about the nature of reading. The Commission uses these generalizations to describe some essential characteristics of good readers and what's more, presents some research studies that show that lots of things can be done to help students who need help in acquiring these characteristics. These generalizations derive from the research of the past decade:

1. Reading is a constructive process.
2. Reading must be fluent.
3. Reading must be strategic.
4. Reading requires motivation.
5. Reading is a continuously developing skill.

Teachers of reading and developers of reading programs would do well to reflect upon these generalizations and upon their implications for teaching, learning, and program development. Of special relevance to teachers intent on helping all of their students become good readers, and program developers anxious to

include useful teaching procedures in their teacher's guides, is the research about the teaching of reading as a constructive process and a strategic activity to those students who are neither sufficiently constructive nor particularly strategic as they read.[1]

Such procedures are being developed in a number of places as researchers try out and assess the effects of some direct instruction activities that are variously described as "reciprocal teaching," "informed strategies for learning," "direct explanation," and "question answering techniques." According to the Commission, direct instruction means "explaining the steps in a thought process that gives birth to comprehension. Direct instruction may mean that the teacher models a strategy by thinking aloud about how he or she is going about understanding a passage" (p. 75). In fact, each of the four examples of direct instruction described below makes the strategies of good readers "public" to readers who haven't developed them.

The reciprocal teaching procedures developed by Palincsar and Brown (1984) start as a dialogue between teacher and students. The dialogue is organized around four strategies: summarizing, question generating, clarifying, and predicting. Pointing out that comprehending information in textbooks requires a "split mental focus"--students must concentrate on what they are reading, and at the same time on themselves as learners--these researchers have established that "novice" comprehenders, that is low achieving students, benefit enormously as they learn

how to use the four strategies. These strategies were selected because they were observed as similar to the activities many expert readers engage in as they read. Reciprocal teaching procedures provide a natural context for a teacher to overtly engage in and model these "expert" comprehension and self-monitoring strategies, and then to transfer them to the control of the students. The transferral is gradual, "The teacher models and explains, relinquishing part of the task to the novices only at the level each one is capable of negotiating at any one point in time. Increasingly, as a novice becomes more competent, the teacher increases her demands, requiring participation at a slightly more challenging level" (p. 14). Reciprocal teaching procedures have been successfully used with junior high school, secondary, and community college students.

Paris, Cross, and Lipson (1984) developed a program with third and fifth graders called "Informed Strategies for Learning." The program is organized around lessons that contain group discussions and explicit instruction about reading strategies. The purpose of the lessons is to help students learn about reading strategies--what they are, how to use them, when to apply them, and why they are functional and necessary. Metaphors, such as "searching for clues," "rounding up ideas," and "planning your reading trip," are used to introduce the strategies. Strategies the students work with include declaring a reading purpose, gathering clues to meaning, evaluating evidence, predicting text information, and monitoring and repairing comprehension breakdowns. Informed strategies for

learning lessons include discussions of selected strategies, guided practice with reading assignments during which the students are required to practice using the strategies, and group discussions that focus on the students' experiences with the strategies. Students who have gone through a sequence of lessons have shown significant gains in the awareness of and use of reading strategies for reading, studying, writing, and learning.

Duffy (1981), who uses several forms of direct instruction to teach comprehension skill, points up the need to distinguish direct instruction from the more traditional procedures of questioning, discussion, and guided practice. In one set of intervention studies, Roehler and Duffy (1984) use the term "direct explanation" to describe some procedures teachers can use "to help students, especially slower ones, consciously employ strategies that good readers apparently learn without assistance" (p. 265). They emphasize that teachers should think of skills and strategies as the mental process that good readers use when they encounter problems in reading and therefore think of teaching as the explanations they can provide about a given skill or strategy, its value, and "the secret" of using it successfully. These researchers urge that teachers persist in using direct explanation--despite differing advice they might encounter in teachers' guides, and the constraints of classroom life. They also urge that teachers be conscious of the thinking <u>they</u> go through when they use a strategy to understand what they are reading.

Raphael (1982) taught grade school students strategies for answering questions. The students were taught to use three different techniques to figure out how to answer questions. They were also taught to discriminate when and how to use each technique. These three techniques are labelled "Right There," "Think and Search," and "On My Own." They describe the techniques as follows: 1. Right There (both the question and the answer come from the same sentence), 2. Think and Search (the question and the answer come from different parts of the text), and 3. On My Own (the question originates in the text, but the answer comes from the students' prior knowledge). Students of all ability groups who got systematic and directed instruction in these question answering techniques comprehended more of what they read, and also learned to better monitor their own comprehension.

Each of these procedures reflects the IRA definition of strategy "a systematic plan for achieving a goal or result." The results achieved by these researchers indicate that their plans have achieved their goals: better readers. The research evidence supporting these procedures is very strong. The implications to teachers and to program developers (and the need for further research in these promising areas) seem very compelling.

Thus the view of reading as a constructive and strategic activity (and research about the deliberate teaching and the successful learning of reading as a constructive and strategic activity) contains a strong message. This message is

particularly important to good readers who are professionally involved with reading, and whose goals include making good readers of essentially all of the students in American classrooms. The five generalizations about reading do speak to the teaching of reading. Readers who are able to construct meaning, who possess fluent decoding skill, and who read strategically will very likely find reading a motivating activity and an activity that will improve during a lifetime of pleasure and practice.

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Footnote

[1]Reading strategies is the subject of this article but given that fluent reading is also a characteristic of good readers, teachers and program writers would also do well to attend to the research supporting the need for students to decode words quickly and accurately. They should also become aware of some of the research-based procedures discussed in the Report--procedures that will help students develop reading fluency.